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# Disclosures on Secret Plane Remain a Political Football

By **CHARLES MOHR**

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 23 — In the last three weeks officials of the Carter Administration have had opportunity to reply to charges by Ronald Reagan and others that the Administration dealt a "grievous blow" to national security by disclosing, for political purposes, a secret effort to develop an aircraft capable of escaping radar detection.

The Administration defended its disclosures about the "Stealth" aircraft by arguing that they would have become necessary within months in any case and that unauthorized disclosures of information in August made prompt official disclosure inescapable.

Despite those arguments and despite the indignant denials of high Defense Department officials and President Carter that they or anyone acting on the President's authority had engineered the disclosures to justify the official disclosure, the issue may die hard.

And its ultimate bearing on President Carter's re-election prospects may depend not so much on unproved suggestions of impropriety as on judgments and actions freely admitted by Administration officials.

## Body of Information

Days of testimony before the subcommittee on investigations of the House Armed Services Committee, interviews with a variety of sources, the growing printed record and the accumulation of Administration statements have created a body of information that in some ways illuminates but in other ways deepens the shadows of the Stealth controversy. This is the chronology that emerges:

Soon after taking office in 1977, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and the Undersecretary for Research and Engineering, William J. Perry, were reviewing some \$2 billion worth of experimental "technology base" defense programs and found among them a program to develop "low observable" characteristics in aircraft that would enable them to avoid detection by air defense systems, such as radar.

The technical details of the Stealth program were secret, but its existence had been discussed in fragments in aerospace and defense trade journals in 1975 and 1976.

Mr. Brown and Dr. Perry apparently believed that the program had unusual significance and promise. All elements of it, including "program existence," were placed under "compartmented" and "named list" secrecy of the highest order, and to Dr. Perry's many other duties was added that of project manager.

Financing stood at about \$10 million in 1977, according to an article published Aug. 22, 1978 in Armed Forces Journal that was based in considerable part on an interview with Dr. Perry. The article, written by the editor, Benjamin F. Schemmer, said at one point that spending on Stealth had grown to "hundreds of millions of dollars a year."

## Cost Put Around \$1 Billion

Because President Carter, Secretary Brown and Undersecretary Perry have all said the program has grown "a hundredfold," there is indirect evidence that financing may now be in the neighborhood of \$1 billion.

Certainly, some Defense Department officials regard the Stealth program as the most promising and important of all experimental military efforts now underway, even though it is far from turning out operation military aircraft, they say.

Dr. Perry himself testified to a Congressional subcommittee investigating the matter that "we set extraordinary goals — performance far beyond what had been achieved, with program schedules moving at a substantially faster pace than we normally expect."

"I take more personal pride in this program than in any other program in which I have been involved," he added.

In June of 1978, Dr. Perry has testified, he prevailed upon Mr. Schemmer not to publish an article on Stealth that had been pieced together from technical records and other sources. Dr. Perry argued that publishing the article would harm the national interests.

Dr. Perry also has testified, however, that by this year he had become increasingly doubtful of maintaining the secrecy of "program existence" much longer and that he had told Secretary Brown so.

The expanding size and expense of the program meant that a growing circle of people, including Senators and Representatives, would have to be informed of the program's existence, the two men say.

Even so, two glancing references in the press to Stealth in June did not provoke any official announcement of the program. And last January an Air Force general, Kelly Burke, was permitted to say in a speech to an aeronautical association meeting in Monterey, Calif., that "high on our list of hardware explorations is radar-absorbing material to reduce radar cross sections" of aircraft, because, Dr. Perry later testified, failure to mention such research would have "created a vacuum which would have been inexplicable" and might have aroused Soviet suspicions of a breakthrough.

## Reaction to Post Story

The reaction to a front-page story in The Washington Post on Aug. 14 was starkly different.

That story said that President Carter would "commit himself" to developing a new strategic bomber, perhaps that very night in his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in New York. Mr. Carter, the story added, would thus be able to argue that he had acted wisely in canceling the B-1 bomber program in 1977 and thereby "steal a march" on Mr. Reagan.

The Republican Presidential candidate's criticism would be blunted, the thinking went, because the President could say that "breakthroughs in technology" would make a newer bomber more capable, and a rudimentary description of the "new bomber" followed.

Although the concerned Defense Department officials were later to deny almost every aspect of the story, and though its description of Stealth was sketchy, Dr. Perry now describes the story as "the major security break" that "irretrievably compromised the existence of the program."

Dr. Perry has testified before the investigations subcommittee of Representative Samuel S. Stratton, Democrat of upstate New York, that the same day the story appeared, Aug. 14, he sent a recommendation to Secretary Brown that "program existence" be declassified and new security guidelines adopted. On Aug. 16 that was done.

Mr. Brown argued before the Stratton subcommittee that to have ignored the Post story was a "totally unworkable option" leading to a "cascade of new leaks, some of them containing much more damaging information about the technical details of the program."

## Brown's Reasoning Disputed

That is one of the central elements of the controversy and one that, perhaps, can never be resolved.

Several Republicans, notably Representative Robin L. Beard, Republican of Tennessee, and Senator John W. Warner, Republican of Virginia, say they simply cannot see how Secretary Brown's basic argument is credible. And General Richard H. Ellis of the Strategic Air Command strongly urged against official confirmation, saying it would be give Moscow years "of advance warning" of an operational system they must eventually counter and would "sound the death knell of that system."

Whether or not there was merit in the Defense Secretary's basic logic, the actual steps taken by the department to "limit damage" left some Congressmen in both parties dumbfounded.

On Aug. 18 Dr. Perry summoned Mr. Schemmer and informed him that some elements of the program were being declassified. Because Mr. Schemmer had suppressed a story two years before at Dr. Perry's request, he was given permission to publish a new story, the one that appeared on Aug. 22.

Dr. Perry later told the Stratton subcommittee that he had dealt with Mr. Schemmer only partly out of a sense of

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obligation to the editor. Another major factor, Dr. Perry said, was to dissuade Mr. Schemmer from including "damaging" information.

However, Mr. Schemmer has testified that, after re-reading his own story and the information disclosed in other publications, he concluded that the other disclosures were just "smoke." He telephoned Dr. Perry to urge, unsuccessfully, that no disclosure be made.

Mr. Schemmer has said that 20 to 30 percent of his article was new material furnished that day by Dr. Perry, and the article seems vastly more authoritative and revealing than any of the unauthorized disclosures that Secretary Brown described as "deplorable."

It contains considerable information about test flights on several prototypes and mentions that a Stealth version of a strategic bomber is on the drawing boards.

#### Brown's Aug. 22 News Conference

The 11-page, single-spaced transcript of Secretary Brown's own news conference of Aug. 22 is also apparently a complete confirmation of what Mr. Brown called "a major technological advance of great military significance." The Secretary said that the Stealth technology "enables the United States to build manned and unmanned aircraft that cannot be successfully intercepted with existing air defense systems. We have demonstrated to our satisfaction that the technology works."

It was this emphasis on the success of the program that Mr. Reagan most criticized, calling it a "cynical misuse of power and a clear abuse of the public trust."

In attempting to inform members of four Congressional committees of the decision to declassify the program, Dr. Perry encountered embarrassing resistance, from Senators who strongly advised against declassification and then

from some Representatives who say that they believed they were being admonished to keep the secret that soon flashed across their television screens. Their reaction led to the Congressional investigation, which began on Aug. 27.

The contrast in attitude between the Administration and its critics about the gravity of the security leaks and wisdom of the official disclosure may in fact be the fuel that keeps the controversy alive.

Secretary Brown began his testimony by saying, "I consider it vital that the limited, though necessary, focus on leaks does not divert our attention from the larger reality ... that this nation has achieved a major technological advance of great military significance."

Mr. Beard, the Republican Representative, responded, "I see a political sham going on." He and others remain convinced that a decision was made to transform a secret success to a public success for political gain.